

TACO BELL QUARTERLY

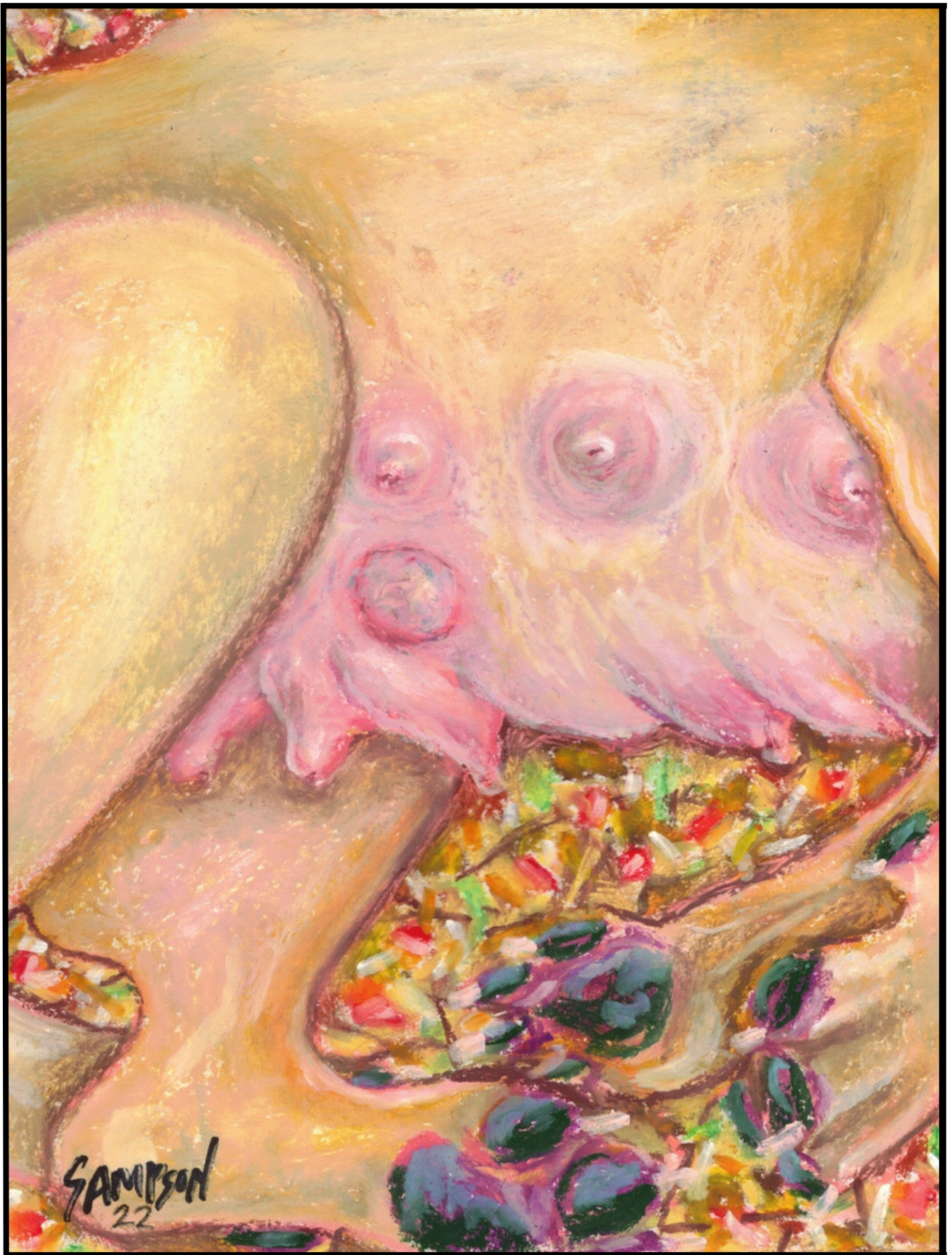
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SAMPSON 22



Letter from the Editor

TBQ6 is here. It's free. It's fresh. It's new. The old lit world is dying. As Peter Venkman warned in *Ghostbusters*, "we are headed towards a disaster of biblical proportions." The literary world is collapsing in on itself. Everything is closing, getting its funding pulled, having its book coverage slashed, laying off its talented writers and editors, and pivoting to video. Everything fucking sucks.

Become a writer anyway. Now is the perfect time to start a novel, a lit mag, a chapbook, or a big dumb project that will absolutely fail. Let's do it anyway. Let's make art. Let's get fast food and write love poems. Let's take the gates. We'll just invent something new in its place. We'll make it up as we go.

Here are some new poems and prose and comics and art. Here are some tits and tumors and piss and smut and existential dread and dogs and cats living together in mass hysteria. It's Art. It's Literary. It's Taco Bell. You will die a billion ass times in creative writing. But you will only live once, and time is already running out. Let's live más.

-MM Carrigan, 2/15/23

With thanks to our **readers** and **volunteers** this issue:

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Tyler Aune,
Ximena Silva

TBQ6 is dedicated to

Kari Flickinger,

whom we lost in 2022,
and whose work appeared in our first issue.

Thank you for helping to invent this thing.

Thank you for taking chances.

Thank you for your writing.

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Oma Unwinds



cover

Oma with Nachos



inside cover

Artist Statement: My work is concerned with understanding periods of pain, struggle, and loss as transitional, taking refuge in the passage of time and the certainty that all things will continue to change and become something entirely new. This often extends to celebrating the beauty in the traditionally abject, damaged, or grotesque. My fascination with deterioration and regrowth informs the subjects of much of my art, pulling from often overlapping themes of poverty, trauma, disability, addiction, religion, and nature.

Ronan Sampson is a multimedia artist and writer based in Michigan. Their work explores themes of class struggle and community and celebrates how queer friendship and love regularly saves them from the pervasive threats of poverty and alcoholism. Ronan is an avid fan of Chicken Chipotle Melts, experimental poetry, and his beloved dog Oma.

This Taco Bell is Sinking into the Boiling Sea

It's been floating for days but it's taking on water
I live in a smooth plastic booth that bobs and
I've forgotten how air conditioning feels
I miss it more than I miss my mother

A dolphin swims between the deep fryers
a tentacle toys with the diet pepsi dispenser
a hermit crab clatters around in a napkin holder
oyster pearls rattle the linoleum
barnacles grow curling like cinnamon twists on the help wanted sign
"let's taco bout a job"
I swallow a soggy chalupa and
watch the wave tips simmer

It's important to me that the fish know that I'm a bisexual anticapitalist
that I recycled and voted
that this isn't my fault
how do I explain that to them how do I explain how
we lived más a little too close to the sun and now we live inside one of her spots how
we baja blasted the earth open and now we live inside her core

So hot brain melt nacho cheese melt
I just want the fish to know
this isn't my fault

Sunny Rosen is an MFA candidate in fiction at LSU, a copywriter and publicity coordinator for LSU Press and *The Southern Review*, and fiction editor for *New Delta Review*. Originally from Newark, Delaware, she currently lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Staircase wit

It's spring & everyone's joking
about killing themselves again. You're getting better
at moving through different cities without your eyes
tapped to the blue dot of your being
on the phone's map. Anywhere you go
it seems you just missed the cherry blossoms,
dead receipts of petals on the ground,
but you've never had a cleaner sense
of direction. The cynicism has limped so far
back around that you can take inspiration
from hot sauce packets. You would like
to live more. You've got a face to make
in the mirror to check that you're cute.
You're at the age where you explain your politics
naked about once a week. You are of the age
where the mass murderers also grew up
with mass murder drills. Traces of carbon-14
thread the cells of everybody you've ever known
& everybody you'll never meet
because you're alive in the same world
as atom bombs. You walk clutching your own hand
like a splintered banister.
Born as you were into real life
at the top of the century, the future's headlines
rise as water or ash or something else hard
to breathe through. You know what to say now.
You've heard it's too late.

Rhiannon McGavin has failed the driver's license test three times. Her work has appeared in *The Believer*, *Teen Vogue*, *The LA Times*, and more. She is the former Youth Poet Laureate of Los Angeles. Her books *Branches* and *Grocery List Poems* are both available from Not A Cult.

Dear White Women,

Please don't sit on me.

The first time a white woman sat on me
was in high school at Taco Bell.

Katy Van Ness plopped down in my lap.

He's mine, she said, about a boy who had been buzzing around. Stay away.

I was compact and brown with long black hair and eyebrows outside the lines.

Is this a joke?, I thought. But still, I kept away.

The second time a white woman sat on me—

yes, again—

was in higher education.

A FEMINIST QUEER DECOLONIAL professor dropped down on my thigh,

hovering first above,

then grazing my left leg.

We were celebrating someone's tenure,

and she wanted to sit next to my friend.

So she claimed my spot THAT I WAS ALREADY SITTING IN,

and I froze because another white woman had

—non-consensually—

placed her body on mine,

presumed I'd anticipate desire by ceding ground.

The third time a white woman sat on me—

Now it's a pattern.—

was at Disney.

Blonde matriarch smoooooshed me down a bench on the Mark Twain ferry

so her adult daughters could join her. She just sat on me?, I said, but as a question because

I couldn't believe that this had happened yet again.

My little girls huddled on the floor, while I stood,

waiting for an answer.

Dear white women, do not sit on me.

My brown body is taking up space.

This is me taking back place.
Christopher Columbus did not discover America,
and I will not yield to the colonizer's comfort.
As earth is my witness,
I will not move again for ass.

Mari Ramler (she/her; Twitter @mari_ramler; mariramler.com) just finished her novel-in-verse, *Losing Jesus in Music City*. Obviously, she doesn't hang out with divinity in Nashville anymore, but she still teaches, as an Associate Professor of English, at Tennessee Tech University.



I'd Like a Medium Drink, Please

At Taco Bell you got a drink for free.
The cashier's eyes were flagrantly downcast,
but your tits were really quite a sight to see.

I don't know how you were feeling about me,
the space between us minuscule or vast,
when at Taco Bell you got a drink for free.

On your chest your shirt went plunging in a V.
In a 90s queerbait drama we were cast.
And your tits were really quite a sight to see.

I ate chalupas; you watched awkwardly.
We kindled flames; they never seemed to last.
The ice melted in the drink you got for free.

Your mother teased me for my poetry,
and knew what we'd been up to in the past.
In your purple carpet room I drank the sea.

You identified as L and I as B.
Your kisses were as sweet as Baja Blast.
At Taco Bell you got a drink for free;
you knew your tits were really quite a sight to see.

Erin Rosen (she/her) is a writer and therapist living in Louisville, KY. Her work has appeared in *Autofocus*, *Underwired Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is currently working on a memoir about marriage, divorce, and madness. In her free time you'll find her watching old episodes of *Dallas* and opining on Sue Ellen's hairstyles. Follow her on Twitter at @rosen_writes.

tbq ideas

Tbq ideas

~~All the fast food places my dad has said something emotionally devastating to me and wondering why it never happened in taco bell~~ nvm dad has cancer

Something where a celebrity is there with me

Doing standup at the ~~dufferin~~ mall taco bell ("what's the deal with men in their 30s who love to sexually assault me?!?!")

|

Lev Littner is a writer currently living in Halifax/Kjipuktuk. They have a BA in Creative Writing from Concordia University. Lev's interests include speculative fiction, socialism, and french fries. Find them on Twitter @levlittner.

This used to be a Fleet Bank.

See, look at their drive-thru lane. See how the bricks still show through the adobe? If the sun hits that *Tender Juicy Steak* sign right you can see Fleet's logo beneath it.

It's all there if you keep looking. You're not looking, Brian says.



He gestures with his fingers. A horizontal peace sign glimmering with burrito blood.

I've unwrapped parts of my soft taco only to press its tissue back in. Each time I do this, the creases lose their tightness. A warm, mysterious body part beneath. Crunch of anti-bones.

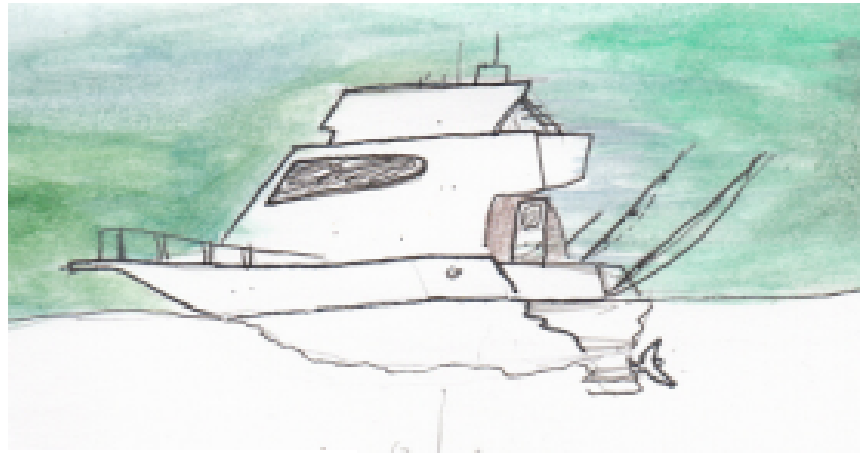


It was a seamstress' shop before the bank bought it. Martha was on the cover of US Hemming's April issue. My grandmother used to bring pants, even upholstered furniture and Martha. Martha. Martha.

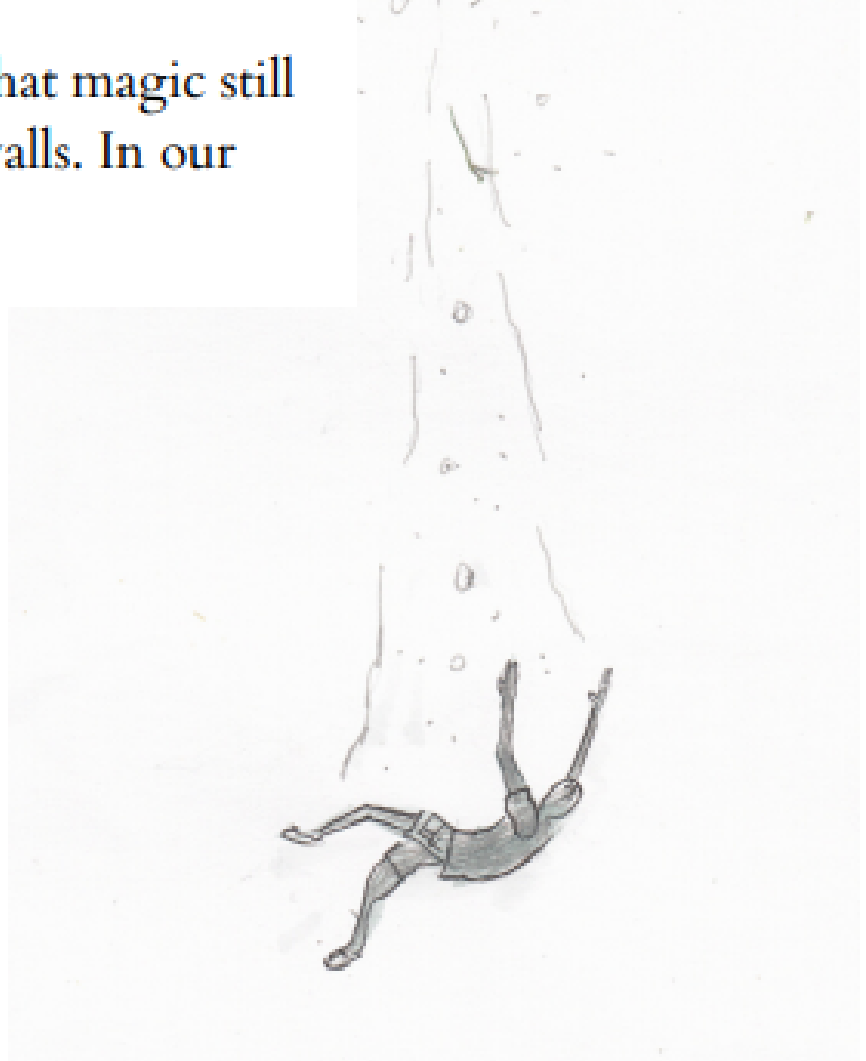


God's magic worked directly through those fingers. Pleats tighter than the factory. The tourists thought she was the cutest thing.

Couldn't get enough of her, the manager says.



If you ask me, that magic still exists in these walls. In our employees.



The bank manager doesn't know that ten years ago we saw my husband's uncle drown in the bay. We never told anyone about that.

In the painting above the manager's head there is a girl carrying cream from a brownish cow that appears increasingly worried about something that is about to happen.

The manager is creating small talk while my husband uses the bathroom.



We had chartered a boat three miles out to catch stripers. I remember rain pouring into our beers. There was an argument. I don't tell the bank manager this story, instead telling her about how my toddler is going through a phase where she thinks she can read the minds of dogs.

Bachelorette party season is coming up, the manager says.
Someone is crying in the lobby, I think.



We needed someone who'd trick rich housewives into three-year data contracts so we hired Erik Depuade who has a striking resemblance to a young Robert Redford.

Erik's family has a house just outside of Newport. He tells me he heard our T-Mobile was a Taco Bell before this and their bathroom was a hookup spot for tourists.



Check under where the carpet splits in the breakroom, he says. You'll see the tiles.

I like the way Erik's hair folds over his head like a book page. I like him but he isn't listening to me.

For a second I think I can smell the Taco Bell repeating as some washed up spirit but I know that's the Amy's non-dairy burrito Erik left in the breakroom garbage.



No good actual food lasts in this town, I say. Erik tells me about wanting to become a police officer. Every plastic in here is pink, and it makes our faces pink, maybe permanently. I don't tell Erik this.



It was a bridal shop at some point, I'm pretty sure.
Something with dresses.

Helen kicks a piece of metal. Burnt unrecognizable.



Seagulls make witch noises overhead, circling over the rubble as if they were promised something. I write: CAUSE-ELEC.87% on my clipboard. There's still a smell like sirloin or hot sand or my daughter's boyfriend's Subaru Impreza after he leaves our driveway.



Pictures of the fire were posted all over Narragansette's Facebook community page. I describe how gruesome it was. Helen isn't listening.

Too bad about this place, I say.

Not too bad at all, Helen says. With the new condos there'll be able to see the ocean from here. Whatever this was before, they couldn't see a thing.



Travis Dahlke is the author of "Milkshake" (Long Day Press). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Joyland, HAD, Juked, Pithead Chapel, and The Longleaf Review, among other journals and collections. Find him at travis-dahlke.com.

Don't Worry, the Dog Survives

I am 45 years old, I am in debt, with a job that does not pay commensurate with the skyrocketing inflation. I am single.

I am not frightened.

When I am older, I will give up my car after a series of catastrophic mechanical breakdowns and go everywhere in a mobility rascal scooter. Tucson will not have built any more pedestrian infrastructure, so I'll have to cruise a brisk 15 mph in the bike lanes. In a small concession to safety, I will hoist a neon-orange flag up a 4-foot wire to flap frantically at driver eye-level. Bike-lane riding is not entirely safe, but it's legal, so I will use it because I have rights to the road as much as any other taxpayer.

I will walk less and gradually my body will pupate into its final form—corpulent and massive. I'll be a decadence of flesh with gravitational heft. The bottom of my ill-fitting shirt will routinely pull up, alternately exposing a wide swath of stretchmark riddled lower back, or a thick, dimpled roll of fat with a dark dent of belly button in the front, depending on which way I move. My hair will be punk, the way it skunks dark purple until that hard edge of stopped-dyeing white. I will not care. I am freed from your ridiculous notions of beauty. I will not be for your viewing pleasure.

Some of you will argue, “you don't want to be beautiful, but you should be healthy.”

“Oh, do go on about that,” I'll say, immediately slurping loudly from my 64 oz Thirst Buster Chiller Bladder Buster Huge Travel Cup filled with soft, crushed ice and sweet tea as I roll right out of that conversation. Don't you get it? The world will be an inferno by then. I will be outside—

Clothing: Shorts!

Legs: Unshaven.

Feet: Chancas.

Vitamin D: Charging.

Thirst: Quenched!

The end of the world is imminent, in the sense that in the future when I am rascaling around Tucson, I will not be planning for a peaceful retirement and fading away into wallpaper at a home where someone forgets to change my diaper. I will still be working part-time at Tuesday Morning, where I can get towels and sheet sets for 75% off. I will hook my friends up with all the tchotchkes and candles.

I will buy little needlepoints with sayings like, “Live, Laugh, Fuck Off,” and hang them like license plates from my scooter. I will live within my modest means. My only extravagance will be food for my rescue Pug, Peanut, the heavy breathing, wall-eyed, potato-shaped dog that rides in the basket of my rascal like a hood ornament. Technically, he’s not allowed in any of the stores I take him into, but what low-paid store clerk is going to stop me? They will be able to see that I am a woman unconcerned with rules.



Peanut and I will go everywhere in this town. My husband will likely stay home, working on his own retirement projects, let’s say bird watching ... or bird feeder building. That’s okay, because Peanut and I will motor to Food City, and then to OK Feed and Supply. We’ll pull up to Taco Bell for a Crunchwrap Supreme that Peanut and I will eat in the parking lot, before rolling through Target. I may take the bus to get out to my respective doctors, but Tucson’s public transportation systems will continue to be paltry, and I’ll have to ride part of the way in that bike lane or sometimes just in the pebbly unmarked edge of the road’s shoulder.

When that white Ford F-150 pulls out too fast from the Circle K and plows into me, I will die instantly from a skull fracture, which will be a blessing since the medical bills

would have destroyed us. The driver of the car will be distraught at first but eventually agree with the consolation from friends that I shouldn't have been in the road. Peanut will be thrown clear and survive. My niece will nurse him back to health after they amputate his mangled leg. He'll spend the rest of his years moving between a plush, air-conditioned house and an air-conditioned Range Rover. Let's be clear, though—he will absolutely miss me and the rascal, the scorched asphalt of a burning world, the open road, a little cupped-handful of ice to crunch, and the cheap tasty treats my dialysis nurses would give him.

I will not get an afterlife. I will simply cease to be. The world will end. Or it will keep going. Everything after me is fuzzy and, frankly, pointless to speculate about. It will not have been a movie-worthy life, but it will still be something. So don't judge me. Don't you dare judge me.

Reneé Bibby (she/her) is the director of The Writers Studio Tucson, where she teaches beginner and advanced creative writing workshops. Her work has appeared in *PRISM International*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Third Point Press*, *The Worcester Review*, and *Wildness*. Her stories have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and Best Small Fictions. Reneé is involved in the writing community as the coordinator of Rejection Competition and Tucson-based Write Wednesday weekly writing meetup. Tweets @specialfeather | reenebibby.com



MAN...



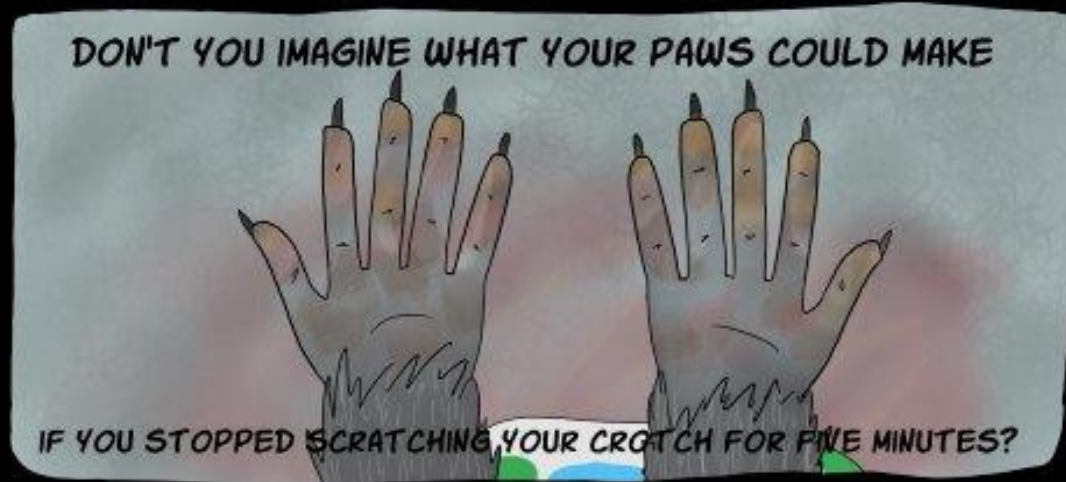
DO YOU EVER
JUST... THINK?







Don't you see the
shapes the stars make?





Molly Amundson (he/him) is an artist, writer, video game enthusiast, part-time welder and full-time cat mom. You can usually find him kicking around on twitter @mollyamundson.

Pushcart Prize nominee **S. M. Hallow** writes speculative fiction of all flavors, from horror to fantasy to romance. Hallow's stories, poems, and visual art can be found in *Baffling Magazine*, *CatsCast*, *Final Girl Bulletin Board*, *The Lovers Literary Journal*, *Prismatica Magazine*, and *Seize the Press*, among others. To learn more about this part-time fairytale witch, full-time vampire, follow Hallow on Tumblr & Twitter @smhallow.

A story which is fiction in case my dad reads it

My dad (a made-up person's dad) and I (but not really me, you understand) drove an hour to pick up his car from the shop, a special shop which only exists an hour away. I require a little reward for such a trip and my dad knows this, so we wound through a confusing parking lot and threaded my little hatchback into the drive-thru of a Taco Bell. We talked about life and drank Baja Blast and then we went to get his car.

The special shop lived in a maze of industry, crowds of buildings with garage entrances in lieu of front doorways, a blanket of concrete in between and not a breath of greenery to be seen. He left to go speak to the mechanic. I had to wait for confirmation that his car was good to go, as not to abandon my dad so far from home if there was an issue. I waited and scrolled through my phone and watched the battery get lower and the last of my Baja Blast diminish, and the ice melted and I drank that too.

I texted him for an update. He replied. There was a problem with the tire rotation or alignment or something. Something about the tires. I'm not the right brand of lesbian to understand.

Too much time passed. I had to pee. I texted my dad again: "do they have a bathroom?" because I could not bear the following scene in my head: me walking into a shop full of car fellas, declaring that I have to pee, only to be told no but now they know I'm just standing around full of pee. I don't know if this makes sense if you don't have social anxiety.

My dad doesn't reply to my text. I am deeply feeling the betrayal of the Baja Blast on this day. Less and less can I ignore it. The maze of industry offers not even the less dignified of options: no open businesses, no bushes, no grass, no trees, nothing save for the fact that it is getting late in the day and there is not a human soul in sight.

I have an idea: the Baja Blast which was my downfall could yet prove to be my salvation. I climb into the backseat of my little hatchback and thank somebody's god that I'm wearing stretchy joggers. I position the cup, and I loosen the tension in me just a little, just to make sure the angle is right.

If you don't have a dick, you know that aiming this kind of thing can be a tricky business. I had a wad of Taco Bell napkins and some sanitizer ready for when I inevitably peed on my hand. But that's just the thing: I know I peed, but it did not go in the Baja Blast cup, nor was it on my pants or my hand. It wasn't anywhere.

The vanishing pee frightened me, and I gave up this solution immediately. But you know you can't just let a little out and survive. I was desperate, and my desperation drove me to a dark place: the concrete on the other side of my car. There was no one around, but I knew that could change any minute. I squatted, my whole ass out because again, no dick, and I pissed like it was an Olympic sport. Images of pressure washing a porch came to mind, and so did a podcast I listened to recently about how easy it is to get labeled a sex offender and how hard it is to live with. A nearby cat watched me with a great deal of judgment.



In record time, I was tidied with papery Taco Bell napkins and sitting back in my little hatchback. The sun kindly eased below the horizon enough that it was too dark to see the wet concrete. Soon after, my dad came out. His car was done. We both drove to a nearby gas station to fuel up before we drove home.

“Oh!” he said to me as he began pumping his gas. “I just saw your text. Did you need to run to the bathroom?”

I looked at him. He could not know what I had done. It was early COVID time, so it was possible the gas station bathroom would not be open. I am not such a grand actress as to nail the charade that might follow.

I said, “You know how sometimes you have to pee and then for some reason it just goes away after a while?”

He thought about this, and he nodded.

“Yeah. My doctor explained it to me once, but I still don’t really get how it works. So weird.”

“So weird.”

A.H. is a queer artist for funsies and queer nonprofit employee for worksies. She's got a cool dad, but even the coolest dads could use a cool ten years before learning the sins of their daughters. Her regular order is a crunchwrap with no tomatoes and a baja blast.

Upon getting bored of Nietzsche and birdwatching in the Taco Bell drive thru

I pull to the drive through window
and the lights are brighter than I remember

them. I check my phone and discover
it is 2AM and after going a little too

far I realize and I ask the cashier *what*
happens when we die?

She smiles, mentally counting the stars
and her paycheck, she responds

That'll be 13 dollars and 47 cents
would you like a receipt? I shake

my head and ask her again, this time
about genetics. *How many mutations*

do you think we can have before
we're aren't

human anymore? The cashier's

smile fades. *Ma'am* — I take a sip
of my Baja Blast —

there's a line. I laugh as I watch

a feather fall

to the ground. Between laughter I say
when I die there won't be a funeral.

I'm going to be buried
on the side of the road, between
asphalt and fucking dirt. Don't
you think that'll be beautiful?
The cashier's face
twists. *Of course it will be.* I can feel
my wings begin to form in my back
I'll be buried there too. I begin to sob
as her feathers spread even further
and I drive
chalupa in one hand
and steering wheel
in the other as I begin to learn
how to fly.

Kaydance Rice (she/her) is a writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan and currently attending Interlochen Arts Academy. Kaydance is the recipient of several regional and national awards from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and was an honorable mention in the 2023 YoungArts awards. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *Cargoes*, *Voicemail Poems*, *Exist Otherwise*, *The Interlochen Review*, and *Full Mood Magazine*. In her free time, Kaydance enjoys playing the viola, rambling about existentialism, and spending time with her plants.

1414 N. Rutherford Blvd

Feels like the center of the universe.

It feels like all my love is here
concentrated into a plastic cup of soda
the color of broken glowsticks.

Out in the parking lot,
I
become something else—
 a wild animal
 a God
 a better version of myself—
and I think about what would happen

if this building burnt to the ground.
if Devon or Antonio got caught
stoned on the clock.
if they stopped handing out free locos tacos coupons.

Out in the parking lot
I doomscroll,
throw my head back like a baby bird
inhaling crunchwrap supreme.
Each sip of baja blast a shot of electricity—
of liquid serotonin—
each fiesta potato a promise.

The polar bears are starving,
the Hoover Dam is dry, and Arizona is nothing
but sandstorms.

 But 1414 N. Rutherford is still here—
 and somehow— so am I.

I remember this address better than my own apartment's.
I write it on a slip of fabric, sew it into my jacket.

Geyl Wells, 21, is a graduate student of English at Middle Tennessee State University. You can find her recent work in *Blue Marble Review*, *Bullshit Lit*, *Let's Stab Caesar!*, *Moody the Zine*, and *Just Femme & Dandy* (forthcoming). Wells was born in the heart of Mississippi, raised in the shadows of Arizona's Superstition Mountains, and lives in the suburbs of Nashville.



do asians dream of perfect sleep?

beyond machine, there is tardiness. time wasted on worrying, gas tanks on empty, & forgotten wallets. email responses 68 days late. bills. after modeling the american dream, there are farts. secrets & liquids spilled under the influence of whatever we fancy. i dream of ugliness. ill-fitting clothes. oversleeping. drool. i don't look like i shit but i do. i look like i cry but i can't. faking wellness is easy with these eyes. only my dentist knows i'm dying. do you know how many times i've failed? barely made it out of a place i wouldn't come back from? i'm a selfish eldest daughter. can't make us proud. i had accommodations in college, i was so sick. almost wrecked my chances at an after. my friends and i have been fired for being sad. i don't think there is a place to go when "gifted" kids fall. it seems their own faults for shattering potential. nothing between us & the ground. once, a boy saw me mad & tasted generations of grief for the first time. he was so scared of such simple things. silly him, fear is for us. say, i saw on the internet you can't even name what happened to you anymore. i wish a very support network to unlikeable survivors. i hope the nasty ways you clawed back when cornered doesn't lose you everything. i hope your a***e* is a bad actor. terrible public speaker. even then i'm still so worried. hey. can i tell you something? it was my impropriety that saved me in the end. he couldn't stand it, my humanness. or his own. something he can never control. i'm leaking, i'm not sorry. don't you see? this is how i become a real boy. beyond sex robot is rage & desire. beyond doctor engineer is i think this is a poorly written poem. i'm obsessed with wrongdoing. it's my ticket out. your correspondence finds me broken, slacking, shivering. i want: never to betray myself like that again. hysteria. madness. a hug. it's a good thing the most wounded don't want revenge. i'm going to get a fucking crunchwrap supreme.

Born in Gò Vấp & raised in Dorchester & Alief, **Thanh Bui** is a writer & actor currently based out of Austin, Texas. Her written work has appeared in *The Offing*, *Lammergeier*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *diaCRITICS*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, & other places accessible to her mom. She loves constantly.

Floating Baby Day

I started out the morning feeling confident in my new floral jumpsuit, and by the end of the day, I was naked and giving birth. Right here on Angela's carpet. I'm glad I was birthing in her office because it was by far the cleanest room on our entire floor.

And people were bringing me stuff. Like the cake knife from the breakroom (to cut the umbilical cord, I guess?), and a large Taco Bell cup filled with scalding water from the Keurig. A knife and hot ass water seemed like dangerous items to have around a newborn, but what do I know, I'd never had a baby until then.

That's why this was probably the wildest thing that had ever happened to me. Did someone secretly inseminate me? Maybe I was the victim of alien abduction, and instead of an anal probe, I got the vag probe? That's the problem with coming to work not pregnant and then giving birth around 4 p.m. There is a lot of mystery here.

Things took a turn after my mid-morning break. I went outside to vape and eat a package of 100-calorie cocoa-dusted almonds from the vending machine like I do every freaking day.

When I finished, Jess was like, "Daria, your stomach looks so huge right now."

And I was like, "Oh my god, it does." See, this jumpsuit was very sleek.

"Maybe you're having an allergic reaction?" Jess asked.

"No way, I eat these nuts every day, Jess."

We both stared at my stomach, but I couldn't even suck it in, no matter how hard I tried. The seams on my sides were getting all wonky.

"Food baby," Jess said, cackling.

“I’m never eating again,” I said and kind of put my arms over my belly. Then we went inside because people would be looking for us. We have these new productivity goals and if we don’t perform, it’s a big fucking deal. You don’t need to know that right now, though.

Later, right before lunch, I felt the baby move, but I didn’t know it was a baby at the time. My tummy felt a little tickle, like tiny butterflies flapping their wings against my insides. It’s kind of sweet to think about now. Jess and I looked it up later, and by 11:15 a.m., my baby was the size of a papaya.

So I felt this fluttering, and I looked down, and I swear my stomach was even bigger. I hadn’t even noticed because I am very into my work. And thank god it was lunchtime, so I raced over to Jess’ cube, and I presented my belly to her like a little beach ball, holding my hands on both sides of my stomach.

“Jess,” I said. I probably looked like I was in one of those pregnancy announcement postcards, except I was frowning.

And we were both like, Holy Shit. And then my jumpsuit started ripping at the seams, right there in her cube. Holes were appearing at my sides, even though the material was at least 10% spandex.

Jess jumped up and quickly untied my jumpsuit and loosened it a little bit around me to give my growing stomach more room, and she took some packing tape from her file cabinet and started ripping off long strips.

“This is a cute outfit, Daria, but it’s so cheap,” she said as she taped up the holes. “You need to stop buying things that cost like \$12.”

Then she took off her cardigan and made me put it on to hide the tape.

“I swear, I haven’t eaten anything all day except my almonds,” I said. “What is happening to me?”

We walked down to the food court—although I was definitely waddling—but I really felt too depressed to eat, and everything smelled nasty anyway. At the time, I thought it was because the lunch special at the crepe place was salmon and swiss, and I am not

a fan of fish. But between the salmon special and the Lysol smell of the janitor mopping, I felt nauseous, and I vomited, right there on the floor of the food court, in front of everyone trying to eat their meals.

Jess grabbed a handful of paper napkins and hauled me to the bathroom to clean up. When I was feeling less woozy, she took me up to Angela's office because that was the only place on Seventeen with a couch.

"Um, knock-knock? Excuse me, Angela? Really sorry to bother you, but Daria is sick and needs to lie down on your couch? I'm going to get her a laptop so she can finish her spreadsheet, but she really needs to lie down," said Jess.

Angela was on the phone but she waved us in. I didn't know it then, but this was the bedrest part of my pregnancy. I basically stayed here for the next two hours. Jess came and checked on me every once in a while, and Angela seemed fine that I was there. I even got to listen to Angela Zoom about the San Antonio deal. Jess was so jealous.

"I want to know everything about that call later," Jess said as she bolted in and practically threw the laptop and a massive bottle of TUMS at me. "I know you feel like total shit, but please, please promise me you'll meet your deadline, okay?"

I ate a few and tried to do what Jess suggested and stay focused on my work, but Angela's assistant, Maggie, came in once, and she took one look at my bloated stomach and was like, "Are you pregnant?"

Angela just yelled at her for creating a potential HR situation.

But that got me thinking, so the next time Jess checked on me, I whispered, "Am I pregnant?"

And Jess just rolled her eyes and said, "Seriously, Daria?" because she knew that I've only messed around with one, maybe three people since before December, and one of those was her cousin from Portland.

"Well, what if I got something from a toilet seat or I accidentally touched some jizz and impregnated myself with a stranger's baby?" I asked.

See, I had a lot of time to think here on Angela's couch, and there were always so many men on the train with their hands down their pants, and I remembered from health class that sperm can live 5-7 days outside a penis.

"Don't overthink it," said Jess. "Just finish your spreadsheet."

I didn't mention this earlier, because it sounds a little creepy, but if any of us had missed our hourly productivity targets, someone from Twenty-Five would have come down to Seventeen and been like, What's the problem, here, Angela? And that whole process would have put us even more behind. I mean, I don't love Angela, but I have a lot of respect for her because she is the only woman manager in this building. I have learned a lot from her, and I didn't want to be the one to fuck up everyone's day. Also, if I stayed late to catch up on my productivity goals, I might not make it to the urgent care to find out what was wrong with me.



That turned out to be a non-issue because a short time later, my water broke. I had been lying here, and my stomach—which I swear had gotten even bigger—got super tight and my back started killing me. I was in so much pain, but I tried not to make a lot of noise because, by this time, Angela was having a small meeting with Marcus and LeRoy, our sales leads. I couldn't help it anymore because my back was on fire, and I screamed. Marcus and LeRoy and Angela jumped up and came over, and well, I guess it was obvious to everyone then. Some fluid had pooled on Angela's couch, and I was soaked.

This is where it gets a little chaotic. I felt a pressure and an overwhelming urge to push, so I put my legs in the air. At that point, my jumpsuit finally gave up and ripped in half, and the top of my baby's head was right there. I couldn't see it, obviously, but that's what Marcus and LeRoy told me later. They were so surprised to see a baby's head!

Suddenly our entire team was at the door because they heard me scream, and they

started running around Angela's office or going to grab helpful things once they realized I was giving birth. Everyone really moved into action. Marcus and LeRoy got me to the floor, Jess grabbed my knees, and Angela handed me the laptop because no one wanted to mess up the productivity goals too bad.

And Maggie was just standing there crying hysterically, saying how unfair this was because her partner was basically infertile and they had done IVF twice with no success.

Then Angela yelled at Maggie again and told everyone else to go back to their cubes, so they all headed out except Jess and Marcus, even though I could tell that everyone really wanted to be with me when I gave birth. We really bonded at the escape room retreat a few weeks ago. We are a good team!

I'm not sure how much time went by. My coworkers tried to go back to work while I was giving birth, but it was practically impossible. Marcus kept yelling at them to get stuff for him, like the knife and the water, and they could barely concentrate anyway with all the excitement.

Some people made a few cold calls or pounded out a couple spreadsheets, but most of my coworkers were huddled by Angela's door, waiting for my baby to make an appearance. And before long, my baby was out.

I swear, this is going to be hard to believe, but it hadn't been out of me for more than a minute, tops, when my baby started levitating. Like, one second it was in Marcus' arms, and the next, it was floating in the air.

We all freaked out and Marcus tried to grab at it, but my baby drifted all the way to the ceiling and it was kind of hovering there looking at me, and the sunlight from the window bounced off Angela's top producer crystalline award onto my baby and made it low-level glow, like one of those salt lamps, and even though Angela's windows only open a little, my little glowing baby turned sideways and zoomed out of the window, through the hazy smog, and up into the clouds.

We were all basically speechless until LeRoy, who is super religious, was like, "We just witnessed something really miraculous."

Jess said, “Should we call the police?”

And Maggie, who was still totally freaking out, ran to the window. I think she would have thrown herself outside to chase down my baby if it wasn’t moving so fast.

Except for the fact that my outfit was officially ruined, I honestly felt really good that my baby was out of me, and even though Maggie was making me feel super guilty, I felt good about it leaving the building altogether.

Angela waved her hands, and that made everyone calm the fuck down, and she crouched down next to me and said, “Daria, are you okay?”

“I think I’m okay, guys. I’m not ready to be a mom,” I said.

Jess was like, “You know what’s best for you!”

And then the phone rang, and it was Twenty-Five. LeRoy answered, “LeRoy here... Our productivity levels are currently at zero? We will rectify this soon, sir. We’re all here in Angela’s office. Just wrapping up a brief huddle. Yes. Yes, lots of good ideas. New things are happening!”

As LeRoy talked to Twenty-Five, I looked down at my naked bod. I realized that I was holding a wet glob of floral material, and it felt so firm in my hand, I almost couldn’t believe my clothes ripped the entire length of my pregnant body in front of the team. Angela came over and draped me with a fuzzy fleece blanket, just like the ones she gave us all for Christmas, with the company name burned into the polyester. The blankie was soft, and I closed my eyes. I felt accomplished. I hope this was counted in my productivity goals. I got so much done today.

M.A. Boswell (she/her) is a 2021 graduate of the MFA in Writing program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She holds a bachelor’s degree in studio art and works in design and communications. M.A. has creative nonfiction in Hobart, and fiction forthcoming in JMWW. Find her on Twitter at @ma_boswell.

I Pay Extra to Doordash Taco Bell

Because the nearest is a mile away, yet, everything is.
The trashcan, the door, the fan. I'm sweating in a room

full of yesterday's napkins & my dog can't come inside
to lay next to me. She's guarding the far-off; a bit of her fur pokes

through the bottom of my bedroom door. She smells a phone
on do-not-disturb with Doordash open. This Crunchwrap &

Baja Blast will save me, I think. I think about the time my
father & I were in his Honda Element sweating, surrounded

by trash, given up on a tent in the hundred-degree Georgia night-sun.
I finish dad's water bottle. Spigot's close, maybe a mile away, he said.

Imagine yourself getting up & opening the door advice
from therapy. I imagine the door swinging open to a land of

Crunchwrap Supremes & Baja Blast fountains with winning lottery ticket towels.
I have a dog untouched by my cumbersome, she's got dinosaur bones to attend to,

not time to protect my rotting room. My father's swimming in the fountain &
I join him. He teaches me how to cannonball, my mother gets it on the camcorder,

we're laughing & I do not think about the distance to the Taco Bell branded
dive board. We'll watch back the tape & say where did all the time go? Here,

the doordasher was six minutes away an hour ago. Contacting support is
something I'm not great at. They can issue a refund or I can wait an hour

for a reorder. An hour is the mile of time. I'll walk my dog,
take out trash, call my parents, & the food will arrive; I see it all clearly

C. Heyne (any/all) is a genderqueer writer from Sunrise, Florida, and resides in Hoboken, NJ. C is the recipient of the William Morgan Poetry Award and has work featured in Sundog Lit, DreamPOP, Identity Theory, and Boats Against The Current, amongst others. Their chapbook "my room (and other wombs)" is forthcoming (Bullshit Lit, 2023).



Full Circle Routine

I'll sleep the indigos away I tell myself.
I'll treat myself to Taco Bell to chase away the butterflies.
I'll center my mind until I disassociate.
The lightning only hits my window once.
Once is enough to shrink deeper into my duvet.
The sun will come out in the morning
Not enough to brighten my day.
The rain will return and
I'll sleep the indigos away I tell myself.
I'll treat myself to Taco Bell to chase away the butterflies.
I'll center my mind until I disassociate.
The lightning only hits once as I drift away.

Shalida A. Askanazi is poet, author, and disability rights activist from Cleveland, Ohio. She is the author of the poetry collection *The Lazarus Girl* that was self-published in 2020. Using her personal journey of being a black disabled woman, Shalida works to make sure there are accurate portrayals of the disabled community in her writing. She is currently working on a memoir.



Dream of the Bell



Mid-Century Más



Live Mas

Dream of the Bell and Mid-Century Mas are made up of logos from burrito wrappings and chip bags, as well as the texture of the nacho chips. The message in Live Mas was made by daubing nacho cheese atop a mix of hot sauces, using a broken chip as a paintbrush. I was compelled by the bell.

Artist Statement: I'm an artist and writer who makes weird art. Most of my art starts off with plain images from nature and/or everyday life, which I then tweak and twist and layer until they're something else entirely. I'm @Ruthenium_Art on Twitter and Instagram. I spent longer taking pictures of the various textures and symbols on the packaging from my Taco Bell order than I did actually eating the food; then I stayed up way past my bedtime, sucked into an art- making trance (I love those.)

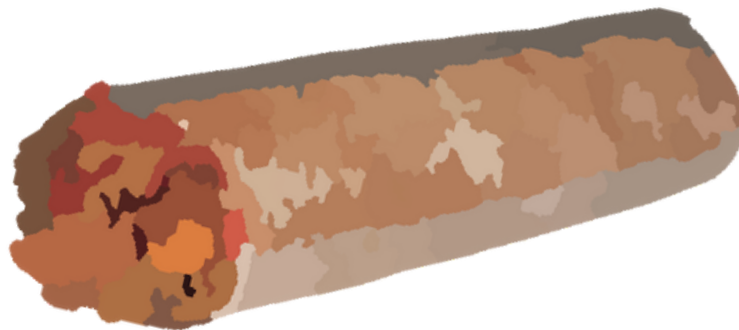
Ruthenium is a nonbinary artist currently living in the state of uncertainty. They are obsessed with texture, context, light, the question "what if?", and creativity as a whole. They've been published in Celestite Poetry, Vulnerary Magazine, Messy Misfits Magazine, and Warning Lines Literary, among other wonderful places. Ruthenium is a general editor for Renaissance Review, and has guest edited for Rabble Review. Their various presences and publications can be found at <https://linktr.ee/Ruthenium>

Love Letters to the Beefy Nacho Griller

As a card-carrying autistic, I got the same thing at Taco Bell every time I went: the Beefy Nacho Griller. I knew that it would be burnt to shit. I knew I would complain about it being burnt to shit. It was a known evil. It was comfort. It was love. Maybe not. Maybe I have unresolved childhood trauma. Maybe I need a better therapist than Youtube.com? I'll consider it. Mind your business. Anyway, last time I went it was gone. GONE. What the hell? What the hell else do they even have there? Obviously I know they have other items, but again, I am autistic every day of the week and doubly so on Sundays, so I just "uhhh I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I need to go. I'm sorry"'d and got the heck out of Dodge. I think I cried actual human tears. I was distraught and devastated. I have not been back since.

Admittedly, this was quite a while ago. I might be writing this for no reason, and I'll wake up to a bunch of people screaming at me that it's back and has been back for a literal year. It'll be nice to receive some death threats. It'll remind me that I'm alive. Please don't doxx me though; I have a very nervous cat that doesn't like strangers appearing at our door. I also have a very nervous me that doesn't like strangers appearing at our door. Okay. I'm sorry to whomever had to spend time reading this. I hope you are well. Also, you look absolutely slammin' today. Good for you, friend.

- K. Allysson Wright, Professional Former-Beefy-Nacho-Griller-Eater, Complainer (of many hats), and Literally Nothing Else.



Oh, just kidding; I remembered another weird Taco Bell story, but this one is a touch more charming somehow. I was on my second date with my current partner a few years ago, and I just had major foot surgery because I have a disrespectful connective tissue disorder, and my rude ass bones won't stay in their assigned seats.

After hours of driving, pointing, storytelling, and laughing, we stopped to watch the airplanes take off closely overhead from a hidden field by the airport. We shared breaths of the sweet, sweet chemtrails, romantically losing brain cells in tandem, day-dreaming of where those planes were off to (and if there were dogs on them.) He and I laughed even more as we were unceremoniously kicked out of said field at sunset by a man who looked tired of our shit for simply existing; how delightfully absurd. We drove out to a lake in order to watch the moonlight reveal the ripples of water.

I was still wearing the cast from the aforementioned foot surgery and dumbass-edly decided to sit in the middle of the car, since the seats had been gone for what looked like years, and the car was stopped in a good spot to see the water. I also wanted to extend my tiny leggies a little bit after all the seat-contained adventuring we had done that day, and I couldn't exactly walk it off. We were whispering back and forth, enjoying both the fresh air and the view until something caught my attention.

Movement. Close movement.

Rustling. Approaching rustling.

My heart rate sky-rocketed. Was I about to get got? Because, full disclosure, we did literally go down a street called "Shady Lane" to get here. Was this all a ploy to take my kidneys?? Damn my chronic inability to take hints!

Foot surgery or not, I wasn't going down without a fight. Mama didn't raise a quitter. In a bid to find something to potentially defend myself, most of me turned. I looked down to find that the casted part of my lower half didn't budge when the rest of my entire body quickly swiveled because it got stopped by some-car-seat-thing. Enter: my first knee dislocation. No, not kneeCAP. My KNEE.

At that exact same time, I found out what was causing the movement and rustling: a nosy, fat-ass cat, probably named Bubba, tummy absolutely SWANGIN' in the light of the moon, its fur sometimes catching it for a split second. I had just dislocated a major joint because a cat decided to not mind his own goddang business. Adorable insult to a not-so-adorable injury; I was ready to sue his little fuzzy ass for emotional damages at this point. And what about my emotional recovery?? Something tells me Youtube.com doesn't have any tips on how to cope with this specific situation.

But, far more importantly, do you know how hard it is to simultaneously be sexy, casually play off your embarrassing frantic movements as excitement to see Bubba? It's very difficult, but somehow, I managed. Everything went down in a matter of seconds, but I was still bombarded with adrenaline, rapidly increasing pain, and paranoia-laced thoughts. I managed to mold my knee back into something that could pass as leg-shaped, if you squinted really hard. I did my world-famous "I'll deal with this properly later" shrug, but being that I was still ON A DATE, we still needed to talk about what to do next.

Due to my inability to keep it together, literally and figuratively, we really only had three options: 1. End the date early, and I'd go back to my boring room and be boringly disabled alone (which I already had on my calendar for the next night,) 2. Go to the ER immediately to make sure I hadn't permanently damaged one of my most important joints forever and ever (Amen) or 3. Go to Taco Bell and pop a PRESCRIBED (thank you very much!) pain pill.



It was then, bent leg stabilized between my still-trembling hands, that I realized I didn't want the night to end at all. It was then, too, I realized that talking to and being with this near-stranger felt much like that very night's breeze, so easy and soothing. I was honestly scared my autism-card would fly right out of my wallet and into that lake. The gorgeous lake I probably never would've seen, if not for the big brown eyes next to me that saw it first and wanted to share its beauty with me. The same eyes that had filled with concern and tried like hell to convince me to go to the ER.



So anyway, yeah, my Beefy Nacho Griller was burnt to shit.

But my overly-charred Beefy Nacho Griller wasn't the only hot thing in that car that night! My knee was also hot and horribly inflamed. And I suppose my tears were technically warm too, but I did turn my head away so my partner wouldn't see them and think I was layering on the sex appeal too much. It was only the second date after all; gotta keep it classy. Always leave them wanting more, girlies!!

Once again, thank you, and I am so sorry (unless it's Bubba that's reading this. I'll see you in court.)

- K. Allysson Wright, Professional Forgetter, Potential-Cat-Lawsuit-Filer, Sexy-Dislocation-Haver, Questionable-Decision-Maker, Former-Beefy-Nacho-Griller-Eater, Complainer (of many hats), and Literally Nothing Else (unless I'm forgetting another something.)

K. Allysson Wright is a 24-year-old neurodivergent, autistic, queer, physically disabled, Black/mixed race POC that best expresses their feelings, thoughts, and experiences through poetry/writing, music, and art. Their goal with their writing is to open minds to new, largely unheard perspectives and to prove that intersectionality exists and matters.

Semiprecious

Something will happen today, in white porch columned
America, downtown, across the smooth & constant
river that runs, it seems, like I used to, for the sake of running,
for the sake of being fast, feeling the world
as it is left behind, the absolute power of a stride,
what my foot could do to a rubberized track,
put it in its place, leave it where I found it but lessened,
& I am gone.

Something will happen later today,
& do you have this anxiety that I do, this semifrantic
state of avoiding, at some great, unknowable cost,
ever being frantic, being out of control—have you ever lived
one heartbeat to the next? I promise I'm not
trying to be dramatic. I assume you have, & do, & are.

Something will happen at 1:30 today: yesterday I said
I am a free man, I should walk along the river, so I did.
There were omens: a raven's feather with its blue sheen,
an empty cardboard Cravings Box flashing wax paper
left on a stone wall, a newborn's white shoe. In the mall,
where I went to be somewhere, legions of gold rings
bearing semiprecious stones in their neat rows & ranks,
each so like a soul.

It helps to know the something
that will happen will not be the worst thing that has
ever happened to a human being. Which is so selfish
it is perhaps more intolerable than what will happen.
I keep waiting for the part of the story where I face
great hardship & emerge more benevolent & humble.
I keep waiting for the part of the contest when I win.

AJ White is a poet and educator from north Georgia who holds degrees from Virginia Commonwealth University, where his work was awarded the Thomas Gay Poetry Prize, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he was a Morehead-Cain Scholar. He lives in central New York, where he is a doctoral student at SUNY Binghamton.



Year five of the Franchise Wars:

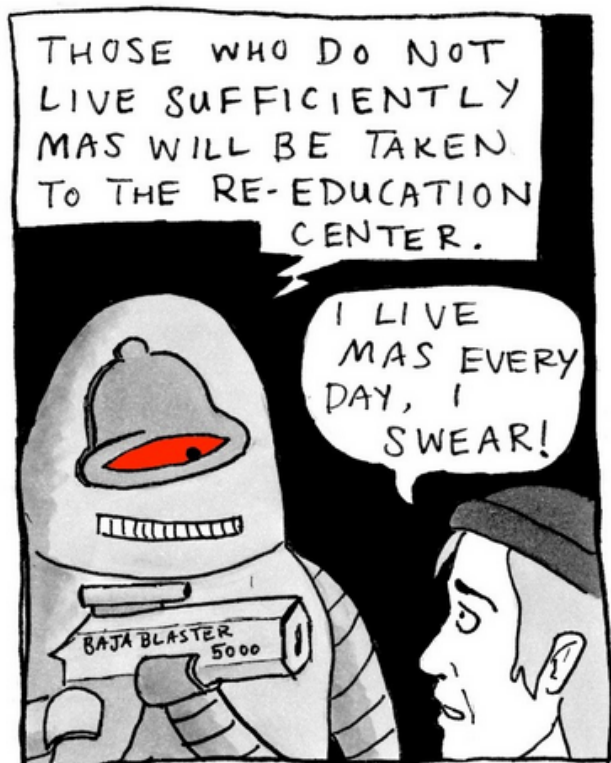
The all-new Bell Bistro triumphs amidst the food shortage

The scabs are extra if you want scabs
they're extra because they take time.
This isn't a drive-thru want hangnails with your pus
packets kind of joint.
If you want that
go cross the street,
they'll lend you a razor.
You think they sterilize anything?
We specialize in mindful cleanliness.

They don't even have a drip bar.
We've got three vintages and
a board-certified anesthesiologist
behind our dining curtain.
And we use the freshest ingredients:
You and you and you now.
Más y más y más alive.
For you the people
by us the people.
Welcome to forever cuisine
where the pork pulls you.
Everything we do so
deliberate.
There are no accidents in this kitchen.

JR Walsh teaches Poetry and Fiction in the Creative Writing Program at SUNY Oswego, where he seeks to prepare others in building new delicious worlds that will survive the Franchise Wars. He's also the Online Editor at *The Citron Review*. For more taco life: Be HAD. To live más in general: itsjrwalsh.com.

A TACO BELL DYSTOPIA



reparrish comics

R.E. Parrish is a cartoonist who lives in Philadelphia. She makes gag strips about literature mostly, and has drawn one graphic novella about frat boys.

Tacorotica: A Fire Sauce Seduction

“It’s a little bit strange. Are you sure?” he asks, though there’s no ambiguity in the arch of my back, the way my tongue rolls across my lower lip and my eyes flick down to his ready bulge.

Our candles have burnt close to the wick during our tap-dance seduction. Molten wax pours onto the nightstand, the dresser. The cramped room is cast in a warm glow, and I see only the cool pallor of his skin. His chest is smoother than I thought, nubile, and only a smattering of twisty hairs.

“I’m sure,” I say, running my fingers through the wiry curls.

He fiddles beneath my eyeline, brushing my flesh with hints of what’s coming. His lips tickle my earlobe, and he whispers, “Did you order extra meat?”

My pulse races, sending blood between my thighs, and when I glance up, his eyes have turned the rusty brown of mild sauce. It’s slow motion as I look down to find it: his hard member placed squarely inside a hard taco shell. I salivate.

“What toppings would you like, sir?” My voice quivers.

“I ordered the supreme.”

A ripple of desire runs through me. On the bed, I find our toys. I plunge two fingers into the sour cream, draw them out and run them along my tongue.

“Don’t be greedy,” he warns.

He flinches at the cool sensation as I slather him in the milky liquid. The ridges of his taut meat tempt me to take him into my mouth then and there, but I resist. Shredded lettuce sprinkles easily onto his thick beef, adhering to the slick cream below, and atop this, I tease him with clumps of cheddar. His manhood twitches. I can hardly restrain my lust and I clutch diced tomatoes in my fist. They’re cool and soft, bursting with juices so much like myself. I place them gently but with confidence along his shaft. The final image is... supreme.

“Number one, your order is ready.” The words catch in my throat. The fear that he will send it back is palpable.

With a clenched jaw he inspects my work to see if the meal is to his liking. His brow is curved as he tips his head and says, “Thank you.”

I come undone. Mouth open wide, I strip his member of its dressings. I nibble away at the hard shell. He moans as I expose him to the air, and I’m hungry for every tiny gasp, a hunger that won’t be sated by lettuce and cheese. My fingers dance between my own legs as I work him with my tongue.

Fire.

Luxurious minutes pass as I gobble him up. Each swallow fills my belly, but the ache between my legs only grows, the need expanding until my core contracts and my pleasure reaches a precipice. A moan breaks the seal of my lips upon him, and my time is as limited as the Flamin’ Hot Cool Ranch Doritos Locos Tacos. He Baja Blasts, his fluids intermingling with the cream in a rapturous Specialties menu of our own making.

Bathing in the aftershocks, he collapses onto the bed. But before I am fully loaded, there is a painful stitch in my abdomen.

I sit up.

“What’s wrong?”

Oh no. I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this.

“Nothing babe, just—” I clutch at my abdomen as my guts twist. I eye the bathroom door. “Be right back.”

Cheeks clenched, I waddle toward the ensuite. The porcelain perch awaits with its cushioned seat, always too warm by ten degrees. I cross the threshold, cold tile sending a shockwave. The fullness of my innards grows urgent. But I’ve just enough time to



take one last look at my work. Eyes closed, arms sprawled, he is the picture of relaxation.

I should close the door.

I know I should close the door.

My intestines gurgle, the sound of water rushing through a pipe. Still watching him, I sit. Buttcheeks cradled in the comforting embrace of the padded seat, I relax. He changes position, propping himself up on his elbow. His muscles flex, but every one of mine releases—a rapturous expulsion that ricochets across nerve endings. I try to stifle my cry in the crook of my arm. There's no containing the other sounds.

I glance up.

He smiles.

I blush.

It's a little bit strange, I think. But it's followed by another thought: He just might be my One. My match. My Fourth Meal.

Rae Knowles (she/her) is a queer woman with multiple works forthcoming from Brigids Gate Press. Her debut novel, *The Stradivarius*, is coming May '23, her sapphic horror novella, *Merciless Waters*, is due out winter '23, and her collaboration with April Yates, *Lies That Bind*, in early '24. A number of her short stories have been published or are forthcoming from publications like *Dark Matter Ink*, *Nightmare*, *Seize the Press*, and *Nosetouch Press*. Recent updates on her work can be found at RaeKnowles.com and you can follow her on twitter and TikTok @_Rae_Knowles

Four Endings To A Grindr Romance

• 1 •

The sex is fine. Good, even. As the two of you are cleaning up, he says: “I wouldn’t mind doing that again.”

“Neither would I,” you say.

Every week or two for the next five years, you do it again.

By the second year, you’ve realized he’s in love with you. You love him too, but he wants a future with you. Kids. You want to leave your crafting projects sprawled out unfinished; he wants every item to have a home. You want to be able to backpack through Europe on a moment’s notice; he already has and knows you never will.

You both date other people, but keep each other on the back burner, leftovers ready to reheat.

He never eats leftovers, which you think is wasteful.

Then he really meets someone. Says they’re trying out monogamy.

Says that again after a slip-up.

Then he’s gone.

A decade later, you see him at a theater. He looks a decade older, but the same. You feel a warmth you never felt in the past. Maybe nostalgia. Maybe loneliness. Maybe you’ve been wrong all along.

You walk over to say hello and give him a hug.

He introduces you to his partner.

• 2 •

The sex is fine. Good, even. As the two of you are cleaning up, he says: “Remind me your name again?”

At first, you’re mad, until you realize: You don’t remember his, either.

You shake hands, then grab your wallet and keys.

As you wait on your Crunchwrap Supreme in the Taco Bell drive-thru, you realize you just shook hands with someone who’s been inside you.

You think about that handshake.

That hand.

• 3 •

The sex is fine. Good, even. As the two of you are cleaning up, he says: Nothing.

He’s avoiding eye contact.

“It’s okay. Really,” you tell him from the shower. It’s obviously not the first time this has happened, and you’re not judging him.

He’s mortified.

“I thought I ... prepared,” he says.

He messages you later to apologize, again, and again you say it’s fine. He says that even though it ended ... poorly ... he likes you and wants to see you again.

You tell him you think you should just be friends, even though you don’t have much interest in being friends.

He agrees and texts you the next week to get drinks, as friends.

You're friends. For years.

Once or twice, while traveling or after a party, you end up in bed together and evade jokes about what happened until you're both satisfied, and then you laugh.

You take him to his chemo appointments when he gets sick, call him Lance Armstrong. He watches your dog while you're out of town, cusses out your shitty ex when you run into him at a bar.

Fifteen years after you meet, you replace "Grindr" with his real last name in your phone.

• 4 •

The sex is fine. Good, even. As the two of you are cleaning up, he says: "Good stuff."

"Good stuff? Really?" you say. You laugh and kiss him on the back of the neck. Then worry that was too intimate too quick.

He brushes it off, and you're back on the bed before either of you have had a chance to recharge. When you realize the physics are against you, you settle into each other's arms, turn on an episode of Schitt's Creek, and fall asleep.

In the morning you tell him, honestly, that it's the first time you've slept over with a one-night stand.

He asks if this was a one-night stand.

You tell him you're not sure.

He smirks, then tells you he can't stand sleeping with the TV on, that he didn't get any sleep.

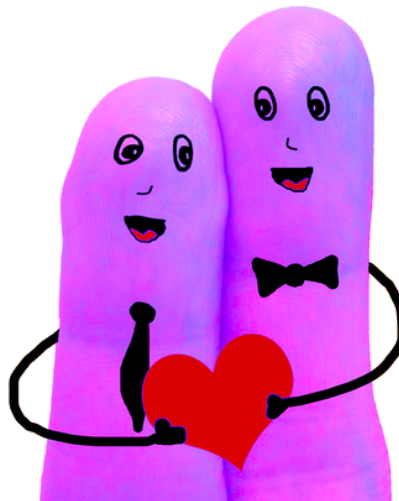
It's not a one-night stand.

Three years later, he's sobbing into your shoulder at his mom's funeral, not tears of

sorrow at her loss but tears of loss that he feels no sorrow. A year after that—he moved in two years ago now—you’re arguing over flowers for the wedding: He wants baby’s breath in the bouquets; you tell him it’s invasive.

At ninety, his heart failing and your mind fleeing, you give each other a kiss, drink down your two capsules each with his favorite Japanese whiskey, and go to sleep.

Mark Bessen (he/him) is a queer writer living in Austin, Texas with his partner, cats, and chickens. Follow him on Twitter: @markbessen.

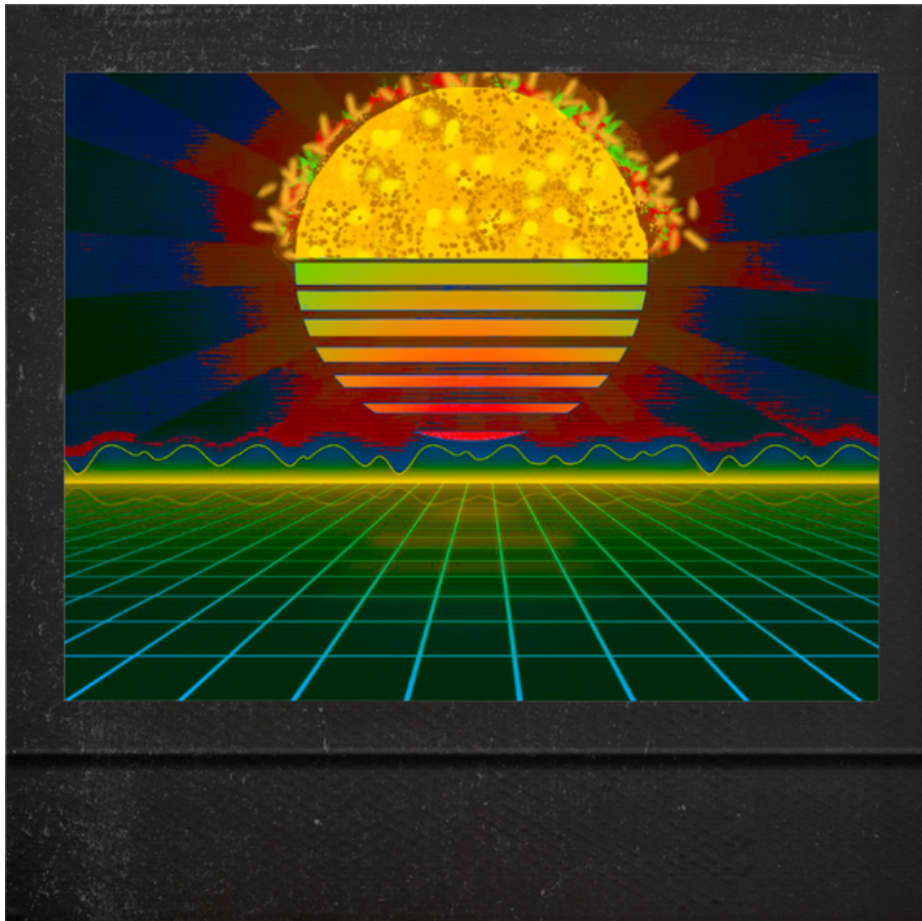


Ode to My Mother

Pissing into a Mountain Dew Baja Blast Cup

on a long car ride in the backseat of her SUV
as I drive 80 miles an hour on the highway.
It's these times I think about
the Antisocial Personality Disorder
you were diagnosed with in prison.
A type Google said you have in common with
Charles Manson and Hannibal Lector. Mother,
you are uncapped; cyst-like, a cavity of abnormal
character containing fluid.
If only that psychiatrist could see you now:
pants strangling your shins
as you squat; so skilled in voiding,
your face lanterned in intermittent light.
You are exquisite,
the Billy the Kid of pissing.
Lawless, aiming straight and true from the hip.
To the world you say, And?! So, fuckin' what!
Fuck their stalls, their toilet paper, their locks.
I want to be like you;
my stream is fitful, without joy.
I am an upside-down umbrella.
You always dirty your hands when you have to.
And when the cup is overflowing,
you roll down the window and set it free
like doves let go at a wedding.

Terri Linn Davis is a neurodivergent, pop-culture obsessed writer and adjunct who teaches writing composition and poetry. She is the co-editor of *Icebreakers Lit*, a journal featuring collaborative writing and the host of the podcast *Too Lit to Quit: the Podcast for Literary Writers*. You can find some of her poems, reviews, and craft talks in *Flypaper Lit*, *Cultural Daily*, *The Daily Drunk Mag*, *Five South*, *Ghost City Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in the Northeastern United States with her co-habby and their three children. You can find her on Twitter @TerriLinnDavis and on her website www.terrilinndavis.com



Ode to Big Chungus

Oh shit!! Here he comes, and dammit! He is sooo big!
The safety we cling to, it is not so big!
[I wish it were bigger!] :_(To live in a nation with a big
time belly! How big! Not big
enough! We sigh big
sighs! The belly grows oh so big.

Big Chungus: bigger
than all The Iliads, bigger
than all the Fates and Furies of Antiquity. His big
heart races like a furious fluffle across a big
field. Watching Big Chungus our hearts grow bunny-big
popping like clouds or roots pop, burrowing and growing big

and yes and beauteous, with cartoon big
eyes, we look upon You. Yes! Big,
Big Chungus. To love as Big
Chungus loves is to be big
in amorous desire. When did life shrink in the biggest
of ways? To hate is to be a small sort of big.

Not Chungus. Chungus knows big
smallness creates bigger smallness. Not such big
waves or novels or poems or big
ideas or big politicians with their big
names and retinue of big
ideas and their Big Whoopsies. Jump high! Big

WHOOPIEEE! Oh my big
dreams, oh my once-bigger
designs! They coulda been Chungus big
humongous Chungus sweet colossus Chungus big—
you who most of all has spent life in bigness
and now here he comes now, see it, in his big

jalopy rolling out the bunny hole, BIG
like the Grand Canyon is BIG
Jellostone will erupt BIG

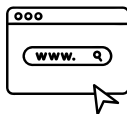
Kaboom! Whoa! So big! We were not a BIG
GENERATION though we dreamed. We dreamed BIG
instead of becoming. Even in love we stunk BIG

stinks! But now here he comes, for real, Big
Chungus out of air to save me again, to reveal the big
theme. Themes bigger than TV, HBO, *The New Yorker*, bigger than big
poetry, burning big as a crunchwrap supreme™. In this big
age we lost the bigness. In our biggest selves? No! No! We had a big
deficit and big depression, a chunky little pandemic, and big

poof! Big Chungus overseeing the last big gasp of our time. Big
Chungus arrives: big, big, BIG!! **BIG**
Chungus! Big inflate yourself! Big inflate our time!

Mike Good lives in Pittsburgh. Some of his recent poetry and book reviews can be found in or is forthcoming from *Bennington Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Five Points*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Prolit*, *Terrain.org*, *Waxwing*, and elsewhere. Find more at mikegoodwrites.wordpress.com.

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